



On Cultures and Interactions

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CHAPTER TWO

ON CULTURES AND INTERACTIONS: THEORIZING THE COMPLEXITY OF INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

ALEX FRAME

In a postmodern, globalised world, composed of various interconnected *scapes*, whether financial, technological, ideological or ethnic (Appadurai, 2001, p. 68), intercultural communication is increasingly presented as an important social issue for multicultural societies. Intercultural communication competence, for example, is often presented as a key professional skill and has received much attention from academics (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, p. 51). However, dominant representations of intercultural communication, notably in business circles and among certain academics, often reduce it to Hofstede-style cataloguing of national cultural differences (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, p. 5). Indeed, the seductive simplicity of comparative models such as those presented by Hofstede (1991), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1993), or Lewis (1999), have brought them considerable commercial success and popularity, to the point where they have often been (inappropriately) applied to analyses of micro-level interactions (Hofstede, 2011, p. 8). As Smith and Bond (1998, p. 60) and Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009, p. 4) both regret, comparative cross-cultural approaches fail to reflect the complexity of the interactions going on at an interpersonal level, since they are designed for macro-level analysis. When seeking to analyse interactions between individuals belonging to different national groups, more complex approaches to communication are required, focusing not exclusively on cultural differences, but rather on the sense-making processes used by individuals to co-construct meaning during an encounter (Frame, 2013).

This chapter argues the case for a more interaction-centred approach to intercultural communication. It is written from a communication perspective, in the general line of what Robert Craig (1999, p. 144)

describes as a sociocultural approach to communication, further inspired by symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1973; Stryker, 1980), ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1984; 2001) and interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982; 1989). It focuses on the intersubjective sense-making processes involved in communication between individuals of different nationalities, and what will be presented as the *dialectical* relationship between communication processes and cultures. With some notable exceptions, ethnographic and ethnomethodologically-inspired approaches to *interpersonal* communication within societies often tend to concentrate on emerging meanings in interactions rather than on underlying cultures. Conversely, studies in *intercultural* communication understandably tend to highlight the importance of cultural differences during encounters, but sometimes understate the importance of the context and of the intersubjective processes which also influence the way people communicate. This chapter seeks to draw upon both traditions, aiming to clarify the way in which different cultures, but also contextual and situational factors, influence the way people go about negotiating meanings and interpretative frames during an interaction. The chapter thus directly addresses the call by Helen Spencer-Oatey and Peter Franklin to develop what they define as a *culture-interactional* approach to intercultural encounters: “Culture-interactional research is particularly important for our understanding of intercultural interaction, and relatively speaking, there has been much less culture-interactional than culture-comparative research. There is thus a great need for more research that explores the dynamics of intercultural interaction.” (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, p. 267).

Culture-Comparative and Culture-Interactional Approaches to Communication

Culture-comparative research, in Spencer-Oatey and Franklin’s terminology (2009, p. 4), is research which studies isolated (national) cultures as systems (macro-level studies) and then seeks to compare the systems studied in order to highlight similarities and differences. Culture-interactional approaches, on the other hand, focus on micro-level interactions involving individuals of different (national) cultures, where individuals’ communication behaviours are influenced by their cultures, but also by many other factors, including the immediate context, definitions of the situation and social roles, expectations, goals and motivations, levels of stress, and so on. Participants notably adapt their behaviour¹ based on their representations of one another, and do not

communicate in the same way with someone of a different nationality and with someone who belongs to their own national group. As Spencer-Oatey and Franklin comment: "Comparative studies are extremely important in that they provide culture-interactional studies with very valuable baseline data for interpretation purposes. However, it cannot be assumed that people's behaviour in intercultural encounters will necessarily be the same as in intracultural encounters, because people often automatically make adjustments" (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, p. 4).

Historically, studies of (national) cultures on a macro-social level, here assimilated to culture-comparative approaches, have dominated the field of intercultural/cross-cultural communication. Scholars have sought to characterise typical behaviours, beliefs and knowledge associated with given cultural groups. Cultures are either presented in the form of monographs, in the anthropological tradition, or compared to one another (Hall & Hall, 1996; Hofstede, 1980; 1991; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1993) using universalising axiologies or value-based dimensions of comparison. Such macrosocial approaches allow us to compare systems and help us to understand the different mindsets or logics underlying different institutions or behaviours, for example.

The questionnaire-based research of Geert Hofstede (1980, 1991, 2011), seeking to differentiate national cultures on the basis of the representations deduced originally from the declarations of respondents in a study conducted among employees of IBM, has been particularly influential in structuring the field. Many subsequent studies have taken Hofstede's value dimensions as a starting point for analysing the behaviour of members of cultural groups. Yet, the use of the value dimensions as a theoretical frame to structure observation of behaviours, notably in interactions involving different national groups, is problematic on several levels. Firstly, it appears dangerous to take for granted, as a basis for observation, categories which themselves result from a study whose methodology has been widely criticised.² Secondly, such studies appear to ignore Hofstede's own warnings concerning the "ecological fallacy" (Hofstede, 1991, p. 112) which consists in confusing two very different levels of study. Hofstede clearly states that his work concerns the macro-social level of analysis, and cannot be applied directly to the micro-social level of interactions between members of different cultures. Yet his warning appears to have gone largely unheeded, since, in an article published in 2011, he points out that "[f]rom 180 studies using [his] work [...] more than half failed to distinguish between societal culture level and individual level differences, which led to numerous errors of interpretation and application" (Hofstede, 2011, p. 8). Whereas Hofstede focuses on

looking for truths in terms of statistical averages concerning cultures on a societal level, it can be exceedingly reductive to seek to apply these averages to individuals who are very unlikely to be *typical* representatives of their particular national culture. Even if this were the case, it should not be forgotten that communicative behaviour in a given situation is influenced by a wide variety of factors, including individuals' experience, the roles being played in the situation, external pressures, interpersonal relationships and the ability to take into account (foreign) identities.

As Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009, p. 4) suggest, scholars working from culture-comparative and culture-interactional approaches to communication are in fact conducting different types of research and focusing on different objects. On the one hand, scholars working in a culture-comparative (macro-level) perspective, such as those inspired by the work of Hofstede, or in the field of cross-cultural psychology (see Smith & Bond, 1998), for example, aim to characterise cultures as systems of signs and meanings, and pinpoint the differences from one (national, societal) culture to another. For scholars who work on micro-level interactions, such differences in societal norms are a starting point which can help explain communicative behaviour in interactions. However, the central focus of their studies is the way in which individuals go about trying to make sense of one another's behaviour, *despite* cultural differences. This includes examining the misunderstandings which may arise, at least in part, from cultural differences, but also a whole range of processes linked to interpersonal communication, such as identification, negotiating meaning, uncertainty reduction, and longer-term processes such as "culture shock" and acculturation. As Arundale (2006, p. 194) points out: "Social interaction is remarkable for its emergent properties which transcend the characteristics of the individuals that jointly produce it". This opens up a whole line of research focusing not on cultural differences, but on the ways in which individuals seek to communicate despite them.

Despite the predominance of culture-comparative or cross-cultural approaches, it should be noted that a certain number of scholars working in the field of intercultural communication have developed approaches to interpersonal interactions between strangers (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992), which generally focus primarily on one or other aspect of these interactions. Among such models, William Gudykunst's *Anxiety and Uncertainty Management Theory* (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992) highlights the influence of levels of anxiety and uncertainty on communication behaviour. The model states that "[m]oderate levels of uncertainty and anxiety are desirable for effective communication and adaptation to new

environments” (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992, p. 11), for example, when anxiety is neither too high (inability to adapt to the Other and tendency to use stereotypes) nor too low (lack of attention paid to what is going on). *Communication Accommodation Theory* (Gallois et al., 1992; Giles & Ogay, 2007) also focuses on behaviour in interactions, underlining the influence of intergroup relations. Based on various contextual elements, the theory tries to predict individual strategies of convergence or divergence, towards or away from the communication style of other participants in an interaction. Linguistic (*pragmatics*) approaches to questions of face and politeness in intercultural communication (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) or *inter-discursive communication* (Scollon & Scollon, 2001) highlight not only cultural differences, but the ways in which individuals of different nationalities may try to overcome them. In *intercultural psychology*, work done by European scholars around Carmel Camilleri (Camilleri et al., 1990), addresses differing identity strategies adopted by migrant groups. Scholars discuss these strategies, through which migrants seek to manage their Otherness in interpersonal interactions, by minimizing it, highlighting it, and so on, during their everyday interactions, in order to conserve or gain self-esteem. Studies into culture shock, adaptation and acculturation processes (e.g. Kim, 2001) focus on the way individuals manage difference, and have been applied notably to enabling expatriate workers or students to better cope with overseas living. In a similar vein, the numerous studies dealing with *intercultural interaction competence* (ICIC) aim to identify the various qualities which can make individuals more effective communicators on the international scene (Ting-Toomey, 1999), with a clear domain of application in the form of intercultural awareness training.

However, if all of these different and often complementary perspectives on intercultural communication focus on interaction processes rather than on cultural differences, for example, they correspond to culture-interactive rather than culture-comparative approaches, they in no way constitute a global paradigm within which culture-interactive research might be framed. And indeed, such a paradigm, were it to exist, would need to take into account the complexity of a social reality in which interculturality is but one contributory factor.

From Culture to Cultures

As Éric Dacheux (1999) points out, in the field of intercultural communication, scholars have generally tended to focus on the first term rather than the second. Communication processes, suggests Dacheux, have

too often been reduced to the question of getting the message across: scholars implicitly assuming that if cultural differences can be overcome, communication of meaning will be more or less transparent. Such an attitude is grounded in the cybernetic tradition of communication (Craig, 1999, p. 141), which leaves little room for the negotiation of norms and codes within the interaction process itself. Scholars working from a sociocultural (Craig, 1999, p. 144) or social constructionist (Mucchielli, 2006, p. 177) standpoint portray communication rather as the process of social construction of meaning. The notions of sender and receiver associated with the telegraphic metaphor give way to the metaphor of the *orchestra* (Birdwhistell, 1970, pp. 67–69; Winkin, 1981, pp. 13–26) and the idea that multimodal symbolic acts are continuously produced by all parties to an interaction, acts whose meanings are interpreted in relation to other acts and to the context. For Dacheux (1999), communication can never be a transparent transfer of meanings from A to B, since this would necessitate an almost telepathic connection between two individuals, which he terms *communion*. Communication, he argues, is precisely the mediating process which makes such communion impossible.

When interculturality is approached from this standpoint, the result is to shift the focus of analysis to sense-making processes in encounters, in which cultural differences are but one (important) factor. Epistemologically, this can potentially enrich our analyses of intercultural interactions, by integrating advances in communication science but also by placing them within the symbolic interactionist framework. Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1973; Stryker, 1980) helps us to understand intercultural encounters in terms of the different social roles played by participants (role identities), and also the multiple groups to which they belong (social identities). As Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) comment:

It is generally accepted that everyone is simultaneously a member of many different cultural groups and that if intercultural researchers focus on only one type of cultural group (such as country-level culture), they are ignoring the potential impact of other types of cultures (such as regional culture, ethnic culture, professional culture, organisational culture and/or religious culture). Nevertheless, in practice, there is little understanding of how these different ‘cultures’ impact on each other or how multi-group membership affects interaction. This is a major set of issues which the field of intercultural interaction has yet to deal with in depth. (p. 46)

The adoption of a culture-interactional approach thus allows us to shift the emphasis away not only from cultural differences, but also, vitally, from national cultures as an exclusive focal point, re-casting intercultural

interaction research as the study of the way various cultures and identities affect how people communicate and make sense of multicultural encounters.

However, if research until now has insisted, to a considerable extent, on national cultures, it is not without good reason. It is relatively often suggested that national culture is a different *type* of culture, which exercises a stronger influence over behaviour (e.g. Hofstede, 1991, p. 181). Indeed, depending on the context, national culture does appear to be a dominant influence, though not because of any structural or qualitative differences between it and other cultures. The reason is rather to do with the way national culture shapes the individual's cognitive development at an early age, through the process of primary socialisation (Berger & Luckmann, 2003, p. 129).

Primary socialisation generally takes place in what might be described as a dominant national context, despite exposure to multiple groups (family, class, regional, ethnic, etc.) within this national context. Since the cultures of these other groups are more-or-less strongly marked by the dominant national culture—the *common denominator* which the majority of their members take for granted—most individuals interiorise the *deeper* traits of national culture (values, basic presuppositions, attitudes, beliefs, etc.). In this sense primary or *tabula rasa* socialisation can be seen as *absolute*, in that individuals have no pre-existing cultural norms, and the primary socialisation culture(s) are assimilated *absolutely*, coming to constitute the ethnocentric norm.

Secondary socialisation (Berger & Luckmann, 2003, p. 138), generally taking place from adolescence onwards, consists in learning new cultural traits *comparatively*, by cataloguing their differences with regard to the internalised ethnocentric norms of primary socialisation. Thus, when an individual comes into contact with a new group, he/she generally assimilates more superficial levels of culture³, then reinterprets them in the light of his/her (culturally-deeper) pre-existing norms, values, and basic presuppositions. Elements of secondary socialisation cultures which are seen to conflict with interiorised primary socialisation norms must be (a) suppressed, (b) modified or reinterpreted, or (c) accepted as *foreign*. Outward observance of communication behaviours linked with secondary socialisation cultures can sometimes conceal deeper tensions between these and underlying (primary socialisation) beliefs and values, which may give rise to misunderstandings. The depth of cultural assimilation depends on a variety of factors, such as relative (perceived) cultural distance, length and intensity of exposure, social pressures and individual

disposition to assimilate, and centrality/salience of secondary socialisation group identity for the individual, among others.

Since it is generally assimilated during primary socialisation, an individual's national culture often appears to have a stronger influence on his/her behaviour and sense-making processes, notably on an unconscious level (unquestioned practises and beliefs, etc.), than other cultures encountered later in life, and which have not been shaped by the same dominant national culture. Nevertheless, this is clearly insufficient justification for ignoring the influence of non-national cultures in intercultural interactions. On the contrary, it is simply one element to be taken into consideration when addressing the central question formulated by Spencer-Oatey and Franklin of "how different 'cultures' impact on each other" (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, p. 46; also *supra*) during communication. Indeed, this question is essential to our understanding of intercultural interactions in that it implicitly draws our attention once again to the central relationship between cultures and communication.

Cultures and Communication

The concept of culture, whether applied to national and/or other social groups, remains notoriously elusive. As Geertz (1973, pp. 10–13) and Appadurai (2001, p. 42) both warn, the use of the substantive can lead to a simplistic reification of the notion of culture, which is, in reality, an ongoing process. For the anthropologist, they argue, culture has no complete material existence (though it is often seen to be reflected in certain artefacts); rather it is an abstraction present in the minds of individuals, and, as such, both intangible and (slightly) different for each person. If culture is to be defined as a substantive, it must be seen as the sum of the different traits (knowledge, communicative behaviours, values, and so on), associated with a social group, at a given time, by members and non-members of that group. While core cultural traits can be considered more or less consensual, there will be less agreement among members of a group about the peripheral traits, and this leads Helen Spencer-Oatey to talk about a "fuzzy" concept (Spencer-Oatey 2000, p. 3). Moreover, culture as a process is undergoing constant incremental evolution through the interactions of its members.

Academics vary as to the degree of stability they associate with culture. At one end of a continuum, everything is seen to be *at the surface*: communication and culture are essentially one and the same. Indeed, for many interculturalists, Edward Hall's statement that "culture is communication and communication is culture" (1959, p. 186) can be taken

as a heuristic simplification underlining the importance of culture in structuring communication behaviours. As Spencer-Oatey and Franklin point out, however, if culture truly *were* communication, in the sense that *everything* were at the surface and behaviours in an interaction were defined only by the social context, it would be hard to conceive of cultural traits as having a deeper, more lasting influence on individual behaviour and consciousness:

So whilst we would agree that it is vital to study and analyse culture in specific situations, we would not agree with Blommaert (1998a) that culture, in all its meanings and with all its affiliated concepts is always situational. Even though behavioural and communicative conventions are typically situationally dependent, very fundamental assumptions and values can be pan-situational (despite being operationalized differently in different contexts). (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, p. 37)

Moreover, and at the other extreme, if Hall's statement is to be taken literally, suggesting that communication is culture would mean that our culture *determines* the way we communicate, thus denying the emergent nature of interactions and even the possibility for individuals of different (national) cultures to communicate. Clearly we need two different terms here for two different concepts, albeit complex ones which are closely linked in a dialectical relationship.

The difference between culture and communication can be illustrated by taking into account macro-, meso- and micro- levels of analysis: distinguishing what is associated (by an individual) with a group, and what is associated with a particular interaction or encounter. If we consider the individual in an interaction to be a subject who generally seeks actively to make sense for and of the people he/she is interacting with, then cultures appear as semiotic (and symbolic) resources that can be used to help interpret others' symbolic acts, anticipate shared meanings and representations, and establish them through communication. Individuals use one another's social and role identities (national groups, other groups, roles played in the encounter), (a) as a guide to interpret what they are saying and doing, and (b) to try to adapt their own behaviour, often in order to make it easier to understand and to show themselves as predictable subjects, based on their salient identities and the representations they think others have of them (at least from what Communication Accommodation Theorists call a "convergence" perspective: Giles & Ogay, 2007, p. 294). Such attempts by the subject to optimise or facilitate sense-making and understanding, based on culturally-prefigured meanings, may be more or less effective. They

obviously do not exclude a host of unconscious actions, reactions, and judgements, also rooted in culturally-prefigured representations or communication behaviours, and they certainly do not rule out misunderstandings, possibly motivated by cultural differences, but which might also be provoked by a host of other contextual factors.

If cultures can thus be seen as sets of pre-figured (and incompletely shared) references and patterns of behaviour, communication is the process by and in which these references and patterns of behaviour are actualised, made salient, redefined, or dismissed, rejected. It is through this grounded process of symbolic mediation that individuals make explicit or negotiate meanings, establishing “points of reference” (Wenger, 1998, p. 83), to which they are able to refer later in the conversation. Participants in an encounter define what they are talking about and the specific ways in which particular terms are used; examples which have been presented as salient may be referred back to; arguments given must be taken into account in explanations; gestures take on particular meanings and a misunderstanding may become a private joke. Here, the cultural code only contains part of the picture, and participants rely also on points of reference defined in the interaction itself, or implicit to the situation and to the roles they are playing. Many other factors also go to make up the “figurative context” (Frame, 2013, pp. 174–246), affecting the way people communicate, such as external pressures to accomplish a task or to manage a relationship, for instance; the physiological or affective states of the participants (anxiety, tiredness, boredom, comfort levels, etc.); the time and place settings of the interaction, and so on. The way an individual interacts with a foreigner, what she does and says and how she reacts, will be influenced by such factors, among others, as:

- her knowledge of the language being used, of the social groups and identities she associates with the other person,
- how she is feeling and the impression she thinks she has made,
- her previous encounters with similar people,
- how the other person seems to expect her to play her particular role in the encounter,
- her levels of motivation, of stress, and so on.

In the light of the debate surrounding the possible situational character of culture, this conception allows us to clearly distinguish between communication, as an intersubjective process taking place in an interaction, and the cultures which pre-figure the interaction and shape (but don’t determine) communication choices and behaviours, through the

mediating influence of the situation and figurative context. This relationship between cultures and communication has been developed in “communicational semi pragmatics” (Frame, 2012, pp. 38–40; Frame, 2013, pp. 174–246; Frame & Boutaud, 2010, p. 88). By placing cultures on the pre-figurative level, the semi pragmatics approach underlines their influence on interpretation and their symbolic potential, which is exploited or *operationalized* differently across interactions.

Communication and cultures are thus in a dialectical relationship, where cultures influence communication practises, and are themselves expressed, actualised and transmitted through communication. Seen from this angle, we can agree with Eric Dacheux (1999, p. 5) that “all communication is intercultural”, since it necessarily brings together multiple cultures, whether in a context traditionally seen as multicultural, or in a situation where participants share the same nationality. Of course, that is not to claim that the intercultural dimension of communication is equally important or influential in all interactions, only that it constitutes a possible angle from which to analyse them (see Frame, 2013, pp. 248–256). In this way, Communication Accommodation Theory (Gallois et al., 1992; Giles & Ogay, 2007) has been applied equally successfully to encounters involving different nationalities, and to inter-generational communication, for example. In encounters between teens and elderly people, but also between salespeople and customers, between policemen and individuals taken into custody, between parents and teachers or between surgeons and their patients, interculturality can be useful angle through which differences in representations, norms and communicative behaviours can be understood. Concepts such as culture shock, stereotypes, or accommodation can indeed help provide insights into certain misunderstandings, provided they can be included in a complex approach to communication which doesn’t focus solely on national cultures, and which also takes into account the context and emergent forms and meanings in an interaction.

Conclusion

This chapter advocates the need to deconstruct the limits which have traditionally been used to structure the field of intercultural communication, but which now appear as artificial constraints which prevent scholars from getting to grips with the complexity of the social activity on which they work. Culture can no longer legitimately be considered as a purely national phenomenon. Whereas cross-cultural studies may choose to focus on the national level, notably for the reasons

evoked above, culture-interactional studies clearly cannot. If the exclusive focus on national cultures is called into question, so are the limits of the field. Interculturality should be seen in a wider sense, as a dimension present in all situations of communication. On the epistemological level, this underlines the potential of culture-interactional research within communication science, reinforcing the importance of the study of communication processes in the former, while providing the latter with key insights into the influence of culture(s) on these processes, through theoretical models such as semiopragmatics. Scholars working in management and organisational communication, on questions linking corporate, professional and national cultures in multinational organisations, for example, already deal with interculturality on this level (Frame, 2009).

In terms of methodology, qualitative research in the symbolic interactionist tradition should dominate questionnaire or survey-based methods, for the study of interactions. The recent resurgence of grounded ethnographic or ethnomethodological work in intercultural communication (Carayol, 2012; Hodges, 2012) appears to reflect these concerns. A key difference with the ethnological approaches of early anthropologists, such as Hall (1959), however, is that such ethnographic accounts focus on the dialectical relationship between cultures and communication in interactions, rather than on communication as a key to understanding a particular national culture.

This shift of focus is not the only major evolution to have taken place since pioneering studies in the field. On the ideological level, cultural relativism and the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954)⁴ have resolutely replaced evolutionary models of cultural progress. However, they bring with them the threat of a politically-correct vision of diversity and multiculturalism, in line with the EU motto of *Unity in Diversity*, which does not always reveal the more sinister side to the globalised world, concerning majority-minority relations and cultural hegemony. To echo once again Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009, p. 267), one of the key issues for future work is to foreground the processes through which cultures influence one another in interactions, in light of the figurative context, power relations, and so on. Such studies will lead not only to a better and more complex understanding of what goes on in a host of multicultural situations, but will also provide important insights into relationships between cultures in the context of globalisation.

Notes

¹ The term behaviour is used here to express all of the actions which can be interpreted by other individuals as what symbolic interactionists term symbolic acts, and what Mead calls “significant symbols” (Mead 1934, p. 45), that is, every utterance, gesture, facial expression, movement, and so on, which can be attributed meaning by other individuals.

² See for example, Ailon, 2008. The major criticisms of Hofstede’s work fall into three categories: the sample used, which was designed to test the homogeneity of IBM culture, and not representative of the national cultures in question; its partial nature (only some national cultures are taken into consideration in the original study, and the categories deduced are then applied to others); and the methodology itself (biases introduced through the reliance on respondents’ declarations, solicited in a particular professional context, translations and cluster analysis).

³ The notion of varying depths of cultural manifestations rests on the widespread multi-layer conception of the structuration of cultures, commonly known as the *onion model of culture* (Hofstede, 1991, Trompenaars & Hampden Turner, 1993, Spencer-Oatey, 2000).

⁴ The contact hypothesis holds that contact and exchanges between cultural groups lead to increased understanding and tolerance between the groups involved. For a convincing counter-argument, see Wolton (2003).

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